

# California

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and Rural Life)**

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## CALIFORNIA

"The spring is beautiful in California. Valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink and white waters in a shallow sea. Then the first tendrils of the grapes swelling from the old gnarled vines, cascade down to cover the trunks. The full green hills are round and green as breasts. And on the level vegetable lands are the mile-long rows of pale green lettuce and the spindly little cauliflowers, the gray-green unearthly artichoke plants." (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, New York, Viking, 1939, p. 308)

Steinbeck's words epitomize the attraction of California to the Joads, and other Okies, and the millions of settlers who came to the "Golden State" seeking the richness of the California earth. Generations of settlers, ranging from the Spanish, the Mexicans, the Japanese, Chinese and Russians --as well as those from other parts of the United States -- came to a land first inhabited by the native Americans. From 1760 on, California became a mecca for agriculture, and the literature documenting its importance starts with the diaries of the Spanish missionaries. In many ways the history of California's agriculture parallels that of the rest of the United States, but over a much shorter time period. Claude Hutchison, in his *History of the University of California and the Land Grant Colleges* (1946), notes that "crowded into a short span of less than a hundred years, the commercial agriculture of California has passed through all of the stages exemplified by several centuries of the world's agricultural history."

When the first settlers arrived in California, bringing their agricultural heritage with them, there were virtually no native crops. The American Indians who roamed the region survived on fishing, hunting, and seeds -- principally acorns. Spanish missionaries cultivated the first crops, beginning with wheat, fruit and nuts. Father Serra brought cattle and seeds, and the missionaries taught the Indians how to farm. The Spanish also introduced cotton and actively experimented with crops -- an activity vividly discussed in the literature of the time. Mission gardens and orchards were begun and aqueducts and other forms of irrigation were started as early as 1797. The mission in Sonoma Valley was the first to produce wine commercially, and by 1830, viticulture had already begun to take on major commercial value. Agustin Haraszthy, regarded as the father of the California wine industry, brought grapevines from Hungary to San Diego (via Wisconsin) in 1849 and in two years had established vineyards. Many of the publications of the early deciduous fruit growers are in desperate need of preservation.

At the time of the discovery of gold in 1848, California was principally occupied by native Americans and Spanish settlers. Their leisurely, rural civilization was swept aside by the throng of Yankee Forty-niners, and California began to be quickly settled by people from all over the world and every state in the Union. Fiction such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, movies like *This Earth is Mine* (filmed at Beringer, one of the earliest California wineries), and documentaries about the migrant workers in Carey McWilliams *Factories in the Field*, reveal part of history of California agriculture and rural life; the rest is found in a myriad of primary research resources and published documents including the diaries and letters of settlers; newspapers and ephemera;

bulletins, circulars, reports and other publications of the University; land grant publications; and in the publications of an incredible array of organizations such as the California Farm Bureau Federation, the State Agricultural Society, the State Fish and Game Commission, the State Board of Viticultural Commissioners, and the Pacific Southwest Forest and Range Experiment Station.

California's politics, economy, culture, society, environment and technology are inextricably tied to agriculture. *California Farmer*, like its counter parts in other states, together with state agricultural society publications, played crucial role in the development of California's agriculture. There were editorials on water rights issues, the concept of ownership of public lands, and perhaps most importantly (in retrospect), the journal played a role in exempting grapevine owners from taxation. Eugene W. Hilgard, noted for his critical work in soil science, provided the first comprehensive description of phylloxera, which destroyed much of the grape crop in the 1870's and devastated rural communities. Pacific Rural Press had two major publications in 1877 on the codling moth, an insect capable of destroying whole orchards. Hubert Howe Bancroft himself wrote on this topic, and there were numerous articles on the first infestation by the Mediterranean fruit fly (Medfly) in the 1920's -- a forecast of its return in the late 1980's. The publications of the California State Grange, which began in 1873, provided legislative and labor information to its members.

What was so special about California that farmers risked all to come? The literature of agriculture and rural life provides the answer -- California's two-season climate (winter rain and summer drought) and technological ingenuity in providing water to farm an arid and semi-arid region were virtually unique. The six distinct growing regions: the North Coast, the Central Coast (including the Napa and Sonoma wine regions), Sacramento Valley, San Joaquin Valley, Mountain (Shasta and Trinity), and Southern California provided the state with the ability to raise an incredible diversity of crops. Forest and rangeland, comprising 60% of California, supplied a mix of wildlife, watershed protection, timber, and recreational possibilities unsurpassed in the nation. The literature also reveals the major controversies over the land. The concept of publicly owned lands -- a distinctive feature of California and other western states -- provoked the debates and struggle for resources that is reflected in the literature, including exploitation of the forests, logging rights, and protection of endangered species.

The incredible diversity of crops that distinguished California agriculture early on continues to this day. Almonds are grown only in California, and are second to grapes in importance. California's citrus crops are world-renowned; in 1873 two navel trees were brought from Bahia, Brazil, to Riverside Colony -- ushering in a totally new crop for the state. California leads the United States in the production of many crops, including avocados, asparagus, cauliflower, oriental vegetables, pistachios, lettuce, and processing tomatoes.

The Gold Rush was a pivotal event for agriculture in California, and indeed elsewhere, as farmers picked up and moved west with the tide. Rice was brought in for the Chinese laborers, who worked in the mines and on the railroads -- and the crop was imbued with enormous political implications due to the concept of "Chinese exclusion". Carey McWilliams, commenting on the "yellow peril," in *Factories in the Field*, noted that "it is the farm labor history of California that illuminates the social problems and that places them in the proper perspective." Japanese farm workers followed the Chinese, and colonies of Russian immigrants

brought their own crops and techniques. Only ten years after the Gold Rush began, wheat had become a prominent commodity and cattle took on additional significance to supply hides and tallow. The Mexican land grant system led to the development of enormous "ranchos" -- a philosophy that continued for another century. The dominance of large farms and ranches, as opposed to family farms in the eastern and midwestern states, has always been characteristic of California. The distances, terrain, and lack of transportation overland made it prohibitively expensive for most small farmers to market their produce and livestock, although a few coastal farmers used the sea to transport goods.

The history of conflicts over agricultural labor also distinguishes the history of California agriculture and rural life, and the literature of the day elucidates the economic, social and political implications. After the controversy over the Chinese and Japanese laborers, the role of Mexicans as migrant laborers for the seasonal harvests became a major issue. There is a wealth of literature in need of preservation that is devoted to the rise of the "braceros," and the creation of the United Farm Workers under the direction of Cesar Chavez. One of the underlying concerns was the effect of pesticides on farm workers, (the Delano grape strike was a significant example) and California's role in pest management has been widely publicized. California was the model for federal law, and many of the important leaflets and special publications of the California Agricultural Experiment Station, and Agricultural Extension (now Cooperative Extension) Service are critical candidates for preservation and improved access. Many of these publications were translated not only into Spanish but, more recently into Vietnamese, reflecting the history of immigration into California. Paul Taylor's assessment of labor appears in numerous publications which are highly regarded and important to preserve for the historical record. In the most recent election in California, the issue of illegal immigrants was highly publicized, and has yet to be resolved. Much of the background information about this controversy can be found in the agricultural literature.

It is impossible to discuss California agriculture without mentioning the importance of water, irrigation, and the constant battles over water rights. The creation of canals and waterways has been well documented; California's irrigation system provides water to 7.6 million acres and the system has been cited as so immense that it is the only other man-made undertaking besides the Great Wall of China that is visible from the moon. California water laws, beginning in 1850, are comparable to the English common law concept of "riparian rights," whereby water rights are given to owners whose land borders on water courses. This created conflicts with the miners who had preceded the farmers and cattle owners. Even today there are debates over the use of water for recreational purposes versus agricultural needs -- rice farmers in particular are criticized for flooding fields. The concept of water as a public utility is reflected in the literature documenting the 1887 Wright Act, which established irrigation districts, and in documentation for the Colorado River Project and the Central Valley Project.

The other area of literature that needs preservation is forestry and fisheries. The University of California has filmed only one major title, and there are numerous publications from the California State Forestry organizations, as well as two unique collections of photographs (Fritz/Metcalf and Sudworth) and soil/vegetation maps of California forests in the 1920's. *The Bibliography of Early California Forestry*, consisting of 69 volumes, exists in very few locations in California -- one at the University and one in the Pacific Southwest Forest and Range

Experiment Station, which has limited public access. Hilgard's writings include his experiments on tree culture. The control of wildfire is also well documented and, ironically, Walter Mulford, who began the forestry program at U. C. Berkeley, saw his house burn in the 1923 Berkeley fire. The 1991 fire in the Berkeley/Oakland hills caused scholars to re-examine many of the earlier photographs and documents.